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## PORTRAITS OF VIRGIL <sup>1</sup>

PROBABLY no writer of the golden age of Roman literature was more famous in his own day and immediately after his death than Virgil. Certainly no classical writer enjoyed half the fame during the middle ages which fell to Virgil's lot. Yet, so far as is known, no authentic, satisfactory portrait of him exists. In fact, until recently our only knowledge of his personal appearance was derived from the brief description given by Donatus in his *Life of Virgil*, 8 (19), p. 56 R.: "Virgil was of tall stature, dark complexion, and rustic countenance; his health had even before been uncertain (the description follows an account of the poet's last illness), for he suffered much in his stomach, throat, and head. He often even spat blood. In food and drink he was very sparing." It is possible that Horace (*Sat.* I, 3, 29 ff.) may refer to Virgil. If that is the case, Virgil was somewhat irascible, wore his hair in countrified fashion, let his toga fall in ungraceful folds, and was careless about tying his shoes. But it is not at all improbable that in these lines Horace is referring to himself; and, in any case, little is added to our knowledge of Virgil's appearance.

Portrait busts of Virgil were common in times not long after his death, for Suetonius (*Calig.* c. 34) says that Caligula was on the point of removing them from all the libraries. Pliny (*Ep.*, III, 7, 8) tells us that Silius Italicus "honored them above all others he bought." Juvenal (*Sat.*, VII, 225 ff.) speaks of Horace and Virgil as being blackened by the soot of the schoolroom, and Lampridius (*Alex. Sever.*, 31) says that Alexander Severus set up the likeness of Virgil with that of Cicero in a *lararium* or private chapel.

From all this one might expect to find many extant portraits of Virgil, but there are none which have been positively identified. A bust in Mantua has been called a portrait of Virgil, but there is no real reason to believe that Virgil is represented. The name was given to the bust by Vespasiano Gonzaga (1531-1591), and the Abate Carli, when he had brought it to Mantua in 1775, tried to prove that it had originally belonged to a statue, supposed to represent Virgil, which

<sup>1</sup> Paper by Professor HAROLD NORTH FOWLER, of Western Reserve University, read at the Classical Conference at Ann Arbor, March 31; see p. 430.

Carlo Malatesta had thrown into the Po or the Mincio in 1392. The arguments advanced fail utterly to prove the connection of the bust with the statue, and in itself the bust bears no evidence of being a Roman portrait.<sup>1</sup> Similar busts exist in other museums. A long haired youth is represented with idealized features. What ground there is for giving the name of Virgil to a statue in Howard Castle\* I do not know, but there is apparently no great probability that the name is correctly given, nor does any recent authority attach the name of Virgil with any confidence to any bust or statue.<sup>3</sup>

But if busts and statues fail to preserve the features of Virgil, it is still possible that some representation of them may exist. Martial, XIV, 186 f., says :

Quam brevis immensum cepit membrana Maronem,  
Ipsius vultus prima tabella gerit.

In other words, the likeness of Virgil used to appear as a frontispiece in editions of his poems. It would seem possible that in the miniatures of some existing manuscripts copies more or less close of the likenesses to which Martial refers might be found. The difficulty is that the manuscripts belong to times so long after Virgil's death that even when they contain representations of the poet there is no certainty that his features are correctly represented. In fact, the miniatures do not agree one with another, except in a few cases, and may be disregarded with the exception of those found in one manuscript, the *codex Romanus*, in the Vatican library.<sup>4</sup> This manuscript has been referred to various dates from the fourth to the thirteenth century. It is written in capitals and adorned with nineteen miniatures, three of which are intended to represent the poet. The manuscript was in the

<sup>1</sup> See Bernoulli, *Roemische Ikonographie*, I, p. 248. For references see also Comparetti, *Virgilio nel medio evo*, I, p. 185; *Vergil in the Middle Ages*, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> Michaelis, *Anc. Marbles in Great Britain, Howard*, 13, = Clarac, V, 904, 2313A.

<sup>3</sup> The Pompeian painting called a portrait of Virgil (*Notizie d. Scavi*, 1892, p. 28) has been shown by Mau (*Mitth. d. Inst., Roem. Abt.*, 1893, p. 19 ff.) to have no claim to be regarded as a portrait.

<sup>4</sup> The latest, and probably the best, account of this manuscript is by P. de Nolhac in the *Mélanges d'Archéologie et d'Histoire*, 1884, pp. 316-333. This is the publication of the École française de Rome. C. O. Müller, *Handbuch d. Arch. d. Kunst*, p. 734, mentions a manuscript in Vienna with portraits of Virgil. Bernoulli, *loc. cit.*, knows this only from Müller's reference to it. It is not mentioned by Hoffmann, *die Wiener Vergil-Handschriften*, in *Zeitschr. f. d. österr. Gymn.*, 1865, pp. 477-508, unless it is included among those which he says "may properly be neglected, as belonging to the fourteenth to twentieth century." Apparently Müller's reference is an error.

library of the abbey of St. Denis, near Paris, in the thirteenth century, as is shown by the words, found on the fourth leaf, in handwriting of that period : *Iste liber est beati Dyon(ysii)*; but by about 1484 it was already in the papal library. The fact that the manuscript is known to have been in France before it came to Rome lends additional probability to de Nohac's suggestion that it may be a product of the revival of art and learning under Charlemagne. At any rate, it is reasonable to assign it to a time later than the sixth, but earlier than the twelfth century. The largest of the three representations of Virgil is thus described by de Nohac :<sup>1</sup> "F. 3 v., middle of the page, before the second Eclogue. The poet is seated in full face on the green cushion of an elevated chair, his feet on a footstool; he holds in his hands a purple roll. He is clothed in a white toga, disclosing the purple bands of his tunic with two bits of the same color below. At his right is a *pluteus*, at his left a closed *scrinium*, both of the brightest vermillion." The other two portraits in the manuscript resemble this in all respects except that they are smaller, and the footstool is omitted, the feet of the poet resting on the border of the picture. A few words may well be added to de Nohac's description. The workmanship of the miniature is rude; the hands are ill formed, with long, curved fingers, and the face is devoid of expression. The eyes are large and staring, the nose hardly more than an elongated rectangle descending from the forehead, the mouth a broad and nearly straight horizontal line. The general impression made by the face is that of early youth. If anything is to be learned from the miniature it is only that Virgil was supposed by the miniaturist to have worn his hair short. Since the three miniatures agree in nearly all particulars it is not improbable that they are all derived from some miniature in an earlier manuscript, and in that case the type may go back to an early date, perhaps almost to the poet's own time. But even if that be so, constant copying for centuries has left little of the original likeness, and the miniatures of the *codex Romanus* throw little light upon the question of Virgil's real appearance.

Two mosaics discovered in recent years give a little more information, but not much unless by their aid it becomes possible to identify

<sup>1</sup> The large miniature is published by Mai, *Virgilii picturae antiquae ex codicibus Vaticanis, Romae*, MDCCCXXXV, Pl. I, and in photographic reproduction by de Nohac, *loc. cit.*, Pl. XI. All the miniatures of this manuscript are published by D'Agincourt, *Histoire de l'art*, Vol. V, Pl. LXIII. For references to other discussions of the miniatures, see Bernoulli, *loc. cit.*, and Comparetti, *loc. cit.*

some bust or statue as a portrait of Virgil. The first is the mosaic of Monnus, discovered in Trier, October 31, 1884.<sup>1</sup> This is a large mosaic, which once covered the entire floor of a room. Part of it has been destroyed, but enough remains to make the disposition of



MOSAIC AT SUSA.

Plate kindly furnished by *The Bookman*.

the whole clear. Broad bands of ornament form a framework for a series of medallions grouped about a central panel in which *Omerus* was represented between *Ingenium* and *Calliope*. Unfortunately this panel has suffered greatly. The other medallions contain representations of the twelve months, of the signs of the zodiac, of poets, authors, or musicians being instructed by the Muses, and busts of actors and authors. The busts of authors are enclosed in squares, and it is among these that the portrait of Virgil is found. Strictly speaking this portrait is not a bust, for the head and neck only are

<sup>1</sup> Published, with description by F. Hettner, in *Antike Denkmäler, herausgegeben vom k. deutschen archäologischen Institut*, I, 4, 1890, Pls. XLVII-XLIX.

represented with but a slight indication of the upper part of the shoulders. The face is youthful, the hair short but thick, and worn with no parting. The head is in full face, but inclined a little toward the right, while the neck is not exactly vertical, but slopes upward toward the left. This makes it seem that the head is slightly turned toward the right. The eyes are wide open, and the pupils are in the upper part of the eyes. This shows that the gaze of the poet is directed upward, and gives a look of liveliness and energy to the face. Nose and mouth are too ill drawn to be of much service in establishing a likeness. The inscription, *Vergilius Maro*, leaves no room for doubt that Virgil is represented, but it is possible that this is a purely imaginary portrait, not a real likeness. And yet the other faces and figures of the mosaic, show such strong and undeniable relationship to works of earlier times,<sup>1</sup> some of the heads are so clearly copies of more or less well-known portraits, that the probability is in favor of the assumption that the head of Virgil also is a copy of a genuine likeness of the poet. The purely decorative style of the mosaic, however, added to the natural limitations of mosaic work in general, forbids us from the start to expect the portrayal of any fine points of physiognomy or expression. The general shape of the head—a somewhat elongated oval, with rather narrow chin—the plentiful short hair, perhaps even the posture of the head and the wide-awake expression of the eyes, may have belonged to the original portrait. But the last mentioned peculiarities—posture and expression—seem to be characteristic of an idealized portrait rather than of one which would represent the poet as he actually lived and moved, so that if the mosaic is in those particulars a faithful copy of an earlier original there is room for doubt as to the faithfulness of that original to the real appearance of the poet. The mosaic of Monnus belongs apparently to the fourth century, and at that time there were undoubtedly many portraits of Virgil accessible to all. How accurate such portraits were would depend upon the care with which they were executed and the excellence of the model selected. The general appearance of the mosaic head of Virgil is that of a copy of a sculptured original rather than of a painting, and the fact that the types of the heads of Hesiod and Ennius in the mosaic have been recognized in well-known busts<sup>2</sup> lends additional probability to the suggestion that the original of the Virgil is to be sought among works of sculpture. As yet, however, no

<sup>1</sup> See Wolters, *Jahrbuch d. k. deutschen arch. Inst.* 1890, p. 213.

<sup>2</sup> Wolters, *loc. cit.*

bust of Virgil corresponding to the mosaic has been found, and the style of the mosaic makes the identification of a sculptured copy of the same original exceedingly difficult, though, it is to be hoped, not impossible.

The second mosaic was found in the autumn of 1896 at Susa, in Tunis.<sup>1</sup> It is a small panel, hardly one meter square. In the center is the poet, seated in an armchair, in full face as in the miniatures of the *codex Romanus*. He is clothed in an ample white toga with blue border, and his buskined feet rest upon a footstool or raised step. Upon his lap he holds a partly open scroll, on which are the words :

Musa, mihi causas memora, quo numine laeso,  
Quidve . . . .<sup>2</sup>

This suffices to show that Virgil is represented. He holds his right hand to his breast, and appears to be listening with rapt attention to Clio and Melpomene, who stands behind his chair at the right and left. Clio is represented as a young girl, gracefully clad in a light blue tunic over which is draped a cloth of light yellow thrown over her left shoulder. Her right arm is bare. In her hands she holds a roll, from which she is reading. Melpomene is a woman of more mature years, clad in rich theatrical costume. In her left hand she holds a mask. Her right elbow leans upon the back of the chair.

The composition is clear and simple, strictly symmetrical, but with symmetry tempered and made agreeable by the variety in the costumes and attitudes of the muses. The *technique* of the mosaic is excellent, all the cubes being of marble, with the exception of a few smalts. The number of colors is limited ; but an effect of unusual breadth and brilliancy is produced by the clever gradation of shades or the sharp opposition of complementary colors. The excellent style of the work shows that it belongs to a good period of art, and Gauckler suggests the end of the first century after Christ. This is, therefore, by far the earliest portrait of Virgil known.

There is nothing very attractive about the face here represented. It is broad, with projecting cheek bones ; the hair is not so copious as in the mosaic of Monnus, and falls in slightly disordered fashion over the forehead ; the features are harsh and pronounced. The mosaic is, to judge from the publication in the *Comptes Rendus*, slightly

<sup>1</sup> Published, with a letter from the discoverer, P. Gauckler, in the *Comptes Rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, 1896, pp. 578-581. My description is taken from this letter. Also published in *The Bookman*, April 1897, p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> *Æneid*, I, 8-9.

injured near the tip of the nose, but the nose appears to be straight, not aquiline, and somewhat broad at the end. The chin is strong and prominent. Gauckler says that the prominent chin is characteristic also of the Vatican miniature, but in this he is mistaken. The chin of the miniature is formed by a weak and expressionless curve, quite in keeping with the entire lack of individuality in the face.

There is great general similarity between the Susa mosaic and the miniatures. In both cases the poet is represented as a beardless man, with short hair, seen from the front, clothed in a white toga, with buskins on his feet; he is sitting in an armchair, and holds a roll of manuscript on his knee. We may even add that in the miniature the desk and book box are arranged symmetrically at each side of the central figure, corresponding in this way to the muses of the mosaic. Nevertheless, no close connection between the mosaic and the miniatures is to be thought of. The mosaic shows strong individual traits, and may be assumed to be a copy, more or less faithful, of some one definite previous work. The miniatures have the peculiarities of their style, but nothing individual, and the custom of representing literary men seated in armchairs was so general in late antiquity and the early middle ages that no importance is to be attached to the fact that Virgil is here seated in an armchair. Nor is the symmetrical arrangement of desk and book box a sign that the miniatures are derived from the same original as the mosaic, for such arrangement has been usual in all ages. It is possible, as has been said, that the miniatures are derived from some early original, but there is no reason to believe that it is the same as the original of the mosaic, and it may be that they merely reproduce a general type of literary man, seated with his professional implements at hand.

At first sight there seems to be little resemblance between the Virgil of the mosaic of Monnus and that of the Susa mosaic. At Trier Virgil is represented as youthful, alert, and vigorous, with full face tapering to a well-rounded and not too prominent chin. At Susa he appears older; his cheeks are thin, his cheek bones project, and his chin is strong and prominent. The differences may be in part accounted for by the apparent age of the poet, the greater prominence of the bones of the face in the Susa mosaic being only natural in a man of middle age who had been long in ill health; but the differences in the osseous structure itself, the greater breadth of both forehead and jaw in the Susa mosaic, can hardly be laid to the account of age. We have seen that the Virgil of the Monnus mosaic probably goes back to a sculp-



tured original, which apparently represented the youthful Virgil somewhat idealized. The whole arrangement of the Susa mosaic, on the other hand, implies an original of quite different character. There is nothing statuesque about this representation, and nothing ideal. The original of the Susa mosaic must have been a painting of some sort, and must have represented Virgil as he appeared in his later years, without attempting to obliterate the traces which ill health had left upon his face.

If these results of the comparison of the two mosaics are correct; both may still be regarded as copies, at third or perhaps twentieth hand, of genuine portraits of Virgil, but the original portraits were probably as unlike each other as the Weimar bust of the youthful Goethe is unlike the portraits of his later years, or as the Napoleon of Delaroche is unlike the Napoleon of less gifted or less imaginative painters. In all probability the Susa mosaic is the better portrait, if that is the better portrait which shows us the man as ordinary persons saw him; but the original of the Monnus mosaic would, perhaps, show us the great poet as he appeared to the eyes of a brother poet whose works were carved in marble or were cast in bronze.